# POLITICAL LEADERS & PARTIES AS BRANDS : A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Universally, there doesn't exist a predominant perception as to whether political parties or political leaders could be treated as brands on lines with commodities. This paper attempts to theoretically establish a relationship between these two terms, namely brand and political parties or leaders. Further it details the various bases on which consumer-citizens develop an understanding about political brands. It builds upon this to talk about the formation of political brand images in the eyes of consumer-citizens which results from the interactions between the leaders, their parties and the ideologies or policies. Following this, the paper talks about the tentative benefits for the consumer-citizen which might result because of the political branding phenomenon. The consumer-citizen, swayed by the benefits arising out of political brands, gets motivated to know more about it, getting in touch in the process and eventually makes the decision with regard to the same. The modern consumer is at the focal point of this research paper and the choices which s/he has with regard to vouching for a particular political party or leader makes for a compelling case for them being considered on lines with a brand.*

*Key words: political brand, political marketing, consumer-citizen, leader, party.*

## INTRODUCTION

Politics is one area which traditionally has not been much associated with the field of marketing and its related concept branding. This is because of many reasons which would be mentioned later in the paper. At

the same time, there are thinkers who find merit in the analogy of politics and marketing and by extension branding.

Newman & Seth (1985) talk about how political marketing educates the voters about the various political parties and leaders thus leading them to making an informed choice. O'Cass and Pecotich (2003) are of the of the view that voting decisions being made by the consumer-citizens are much influenced by their learning of the contestants and their affiliates which in turn depends on their understanding of political marketing.

When one talks about branding (a part of the overall marketing concept), politics is one field which doesn't instantaneously comes to mind. This is so because traditionally politics has not been associated with the domains of marketing and branding. However, with time, branding has been increasingly associated with such phenomena which are societal in nature. One such non-traditional field has been that of politics.

Some more non-traditional fields which have been considered as brands in the western nations have been the Roman Catholic Church (Zinkin, 2004) as well as the popular universities (Jevons, 2006). This is so because the concept of branding is increasingly being associated with all such phenomena which involve some sort of consumerism and choices on the part of the consumer.

Thus, it ought to be a logical assumption that politics be associated with branding as it involves choice on the part of the consumer-citizen and politicians tend to garner support for their electoral cause by engaging in exchange of ideas. This sort of development is akin to the one found in the case of marketing where the marketer engages the consumer in such a way that the product on offer is considered.

On the other hand are those who don't consider politics as a natural extension of the phenomenon of marketing and its subset branding. Thinkers like Henneberg (2006) and O'Shaughnessy (2007) are of the view that the principles which drive a commercial marketplace could not applied to the field of politics. This is so because leaders, on the virtue of being human beings, could not be treated akin to products.

Scammell (1999) and Needham (2005) opine that treating politics on the lines of marketing could lead to heightened confrontation, a tendency to disengage from the founding principles of practicing politics, extreme commercialization of a pure activity like an election, expectation of conformity to set-standards on line with commercial marketing which undoes the very purpose of politics which is based on the concept of differing views amongst the parties and leaders.

Further, Lilleker and Negrine (2003) are of the view that treating politics on par with a commercial concept like marketing would lead to the narrowing of the political agenda as a certain level of congruency would be expected on lines with target-

driven principles of marketing which would do injustice to the golden rule of politics, 'Agree to Disagree'.

Moreover, as per Needham (2005), considering politics similar to marketing might lead to disenchantment on various levels as far as the hierarchy of a political outfit goes. This is so because politics being an arena where every individual member has got the right to disagree and express their views. However, the scope of dissent doesn't find much relevance and acceptance when it comes to the field of marketing. In politics, having an opposition is necessary to keep the ruling party in check. Such a concept is not required in marketing and even if so, the extent and relevance of it is no match to that found in politics.

What is to be understood here from the above discussion is the aspect that many thinkers consider politics and marketing as two compatible concepts. They come up with their reasons whereby they justify how political marketing is a realistic proposition and has come to influence the arena of politics. Then there are the detractors of this notion who denounce the alliance of politics and marketing based on their reservations on the same owing to such factors which don't go hand-in-hand in the two said domains.

The point of interest here is the fact that branding as such exists in two formats, namely brand management and a consumer-centric approach. It is the first school of thought which has come under criticism by those who are not convinced by the idea of political marketing or political branding. This is because brand management talks about developing the identity of a specific brand by applying the practices of branding in a marketplace thus testing its efficacy. It goes without saying that if one transfers the practices from one market to the other without giving much thought to it, would lead to obvious problems the consequences of which could be far-reaching.

On the other hand, there is the consumer-centric approach of marketing which talks about the experiential learning which consumers engage in when they come in contact with a particular brand and in the process are motivated to show their allegiance to the same. It is this approach which advocates the coming together of politics and branding thereby resulting in political branding. This holds significance because this aspect of branding has much to do with the preferences formed in the minds of the consumers owing to their experience with that brand. They take help of mental shortcuts to arrive at a decision with regard to that brand, developing an emotional connect in the process. The field of political branding functions in similar fashion and the advocates of the same vouch for this approach towards political branding.

**Purpose**

This paper deals with the aspect of political branding and provides inputs on it thereby highlighting the various characteristics related to it and how understanding the

same could help the party, leader and the voter in developing a rapport which would eventually lead to a favorable perspective for all of them.

Further, the purpose of writing this research paper is to delve into the notion whether political parties and leaders could be equated with products (though purists have not been in the favour of the same since the concept was introduced in the 1970s). As highlighted above, the real problem lies in how you go about defining brands, from the perspective of brand management, wherein you try unsuccessfully to replicate the learning of one marketplace on another or with a consumer-centric approach, where a lot of thought goes into identifying what all tick the right boxes in the ready reference of consumer-citizens as far as their voting preferences are concerned.

This paper aims to develop an understanding as to what prompts the voters to decide in a particular fashion as to which political brand they prefer over others. It would highlight the connectedness which reportedly exists among the leader, party, policies and the voter and how the phenomenon of political branding helps to interlink them better.

**Approach**

This paper goes about defining political branding and how it has came to reshape the realms of politics. To reach to such an explanation first we need to understand what makes a brand.

A brand is defined as 'A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' (AMA, 1960).

Keeping the above definition in consideration, political parties and leaders clearly fit the bill. These entities have high recall value. Even when we talk about a democracy like India where a substantial number of electorate resides in rural areas, the party symbol and leader's face help them in deciding whom they would vote for. The recall value of a political party symbol is as good as the party manifesto as far as the rural electorate is concerned. What is of significance here is to understand the fact that with time and over the course of voting in different elections, voters develop some sort of bonding and affiliation with a certain political brand which gets reinforced in their minds thereby differentiating themselves from the rival brands hence giving them the edge over the competitors.

Schneider (2004) is of the view that the value which political brands bring with themselves leads to accuracy and consistency among the voters thereby making the respective brands more bankable and trustworthy. This becomes possible due to the awareness of the voters about that specific political brand.

French and Smith (2008) are of a similar view but at the same time they are also of the opinion that it is not necessary that the electorate would have a uniform

knowledge about the political brands in fray. This leads to an uneven situation where one political brand might be better known than its rival brands.

As has been observed by many and is evident from the current trends being formed and surveyed in the build-up to the Presidential election in US of A, despite the billion-dollar campaigns on the part of both the nominees, the average electorate is losing interest in the election process and is increasingly being disengaged to it. This is so because the choice of nominees on the part of both the principal parties, namely the Republicans and the Democrats, has been far from convincing. For many of them, it is like choosing between lesser of the two evils.

Those who have traditionally supported the Republicans are not convinced that Donald Trump is the best which the party could have came up with given the self-contradictory nature of his speeches, the controversies surrounding his personality and the non-seriousness which he evokes. The case of Hillary Clinton is not much better either. The recent e-mail scandal has massively eroded the trust of her followers, not that they had much trust on her in the first place. Both these brands are considered to be weak political brands especially keeping in the mind the charisma of brand Obama who for two straight terms dominated the political landscape of that nation.

On the other hand, there are the partisan voters, those who throw their weight behind the political brands which they follow (French and Smith, 2008). For them, the political brand followed by them is the one which is the better one over the other. Often in such a scenario, logic takes a back seat and blind-following comes to the fore. The die-hard believers turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of their favoured political brand and even if they criticize it, they do it in milder terms. They are highly unforgiving of the rival political brands. Similar is the scenario for the supporters of a particular political brand in the Indian context as well. They would highlight the misdeeds of the rival political brands without saying anything about the shortcomings of the political brand whose cause they espouse.

John et al (2006) are of the view that the ways in which consumers respond to brands on various occasions characterizes the phenomenon of political branding as it very well captures the variations which are to be found in the domain of consumer behavior.

As per Keller and Lehmann (2006), the existing literature on branding, over the course of past two decades or so, has done well in terms of adopting a consumer-centric approach as it has brought to the fore the human element which goes into the making of a brand. The anvil of the phenomenon of political branding has assumed significance thanks to the coming together of consumerism to the field of branding. In other words, political branding talks about how the human element of the choosing of

representatives bears resemblance to the phenomenon of consumerism.

Further, it came to the attention of the contributors to the field of political branding that human beings, when behaving as consumers, have an in-built mechanism of getting to know the benefits which arise out of the preference for one brand over the other. Also, they are to accustom themselves as they become inundated with hoards of information and complex maze of communication. Likewise, the consumer-citizen is faced with the choice to be made, to buy or not to buy (read to vote or not to vote). The increasingly meddling nature of technology in the form of social networking has made the task all the more difficult for the voters as they are bombarded with content flashing non-stop from myriad sources.

An experiential-learning approach has been dealt with in this paper whereby the voters are treated on lines with consumers. This approach has been considered because it opens up the horizon for discussion by bringing into consideration such widely-used concepts as consumer behavior and branding together. As highlighted above, this paper takes into reckoning the appropriateness of political parties and leaders as brands.

The paper highlights a significant trait of political activities which is the learning of consumers about the political brands in fray and more importantly how they use that learning in making informed choices with regard to the political brands. A consumer-oriented approach has been taken in this regard which builds upon the consumer behavior aspect related to political brand.

The paper also highlights the relevance of justifying political parties and leaders as brands. Next, the paper goes about explaining the notion of considering political parties and leaders as brands from the perspective of consumer theory, as was the case earlier in the discussion. Further, the interface among the party, its policies and the leader have been considered as to how they together lead to the idea of political brands.

From there, the paper has delved upon the benefits which the phenomenon of being a political brand accrues upon the consumer-citizen owing to its consumer-centric approach which in turn encourages the electorate to vote in a certain fashion thus endorsing the political brand. Finally, the paper talks about the future implications as related to the field of political branding and how the current political parties and leaders could benefit from the same.

**Findings**

The implications of the concept of political branding are far-reaching and have been brought to the fore, to a certain extent, during the course of this research paper. The paper highlighted the various aspects related to the phenomenon of political branding and how it has both supporters and detractors who have their separate views on the relevance and logic of considering politics and branding together.

During the length of the paper, it was discovered that voters look for mental short-cuts (known as heuristics) whereby they could decide which political brand they would prefer over others. Also, it was understood that informed voter is in a position to make better choices as they are able to differentiate among the brands.

Further, it came to light that in the western democracies, voters are losing interest in the overall electoral process due to weak political brands as is evident in the ongoing Presidential election in US. This is so because they are listless owing to the hopelessness surrounding the choice of nominees of either party. At the same time, the paper also highlighted the concept of partisan voters who stick to their respective political brands even if they know that they are not up to the mark. They choose to ignore the imperfections for the die-hard believers that they are.

Next, the paper showed that political branding helps the voters to decide on their choices because they become aware of the alternatives and reinforce their beliefs towards a particular political brand. This is so because political branding enables the voters to learn the benefits which accrue by following a particular brand over others.

Another aspect which was the outcome of the discussion undertaken in this research paper was the dependability which results owing to the phenomenon of political branding. This is so because once the voters start preferring one political brand over its competitors, the recall value and winning ability improves.

**Value**

This research paper would prove to be of value in the area of studying political brands and the various aspects related to it. A reader who intends to develop an understanding with regard to how politics and branding are related to each other and more importantly how thinkers agree as well as disagree with the two phenomena going together, would find this research paper of value.

Also, the research paper would be of value to those who are of the view that political leaders and parties could be treated as products or not and what is the underlying merit of the same. They would come to the understanding as to what goes into the making of a political brand and how it benefits the party or the leader who is a part of the same.

The paper would add to the existing knowledge base of those who intend to see politics in the contemporary times and how it has been shaped by the consumer-centric approach to it thereby resulting in the phenomenon of political branding. They would come to realize that essentially, political branding comes into the picture owing to a consumer-oriented approach whereby the voters are treated as consumer-citizens who buy into the philosophies of their respective political brands.

Further, the paper would be valuable in the context that it explains how having a

branding approach towards politics brings a certain level of certainty, bankability and assuredness to it thus making it easier for consumer-citizens in terms of making choices as they are better placed to make informed decisions due to the better positioning of competing political brands. Also, because of the heightened interest and information levels, the consumer-citizens feel motivated to exercise their franchise.

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